

# IN REVIEW

New York, New York

Reviewed by Patricia Malarcher

## *Uncommon Threads* Michael Rosenfeld Gallery

It's about time. There's the time it takes for the heat of an artwork's newness to cool, and the time it takes for a change in the climate of art criticism. Spanning 50 years of work by women artists, some now deceased, this exhibition reflects the shift in the critical mainstream toward recognition that material is part of the content of art. By foregrounding material connections, curator Hallie Harrisberg has brought together several generations of artists working in fabric and thread. Many of the 15 were pioneers in 20th century movements that two or three decades ago were separated by categorical divisions. Some were aligned with the Feminist and African-American subdivisions of Fine Art, others with Craft. In the 1970s, for example, Hannalore Baron's association with abstract art probably diverted attention from her sensitive use of fabric and thread. In *War Letter* (1975), however, those materials, echoing gestures of tearing and piercing, add to the sense of personal anguish underlying much of her work. At the same time, Baron's unfinished edges and simple stitches might have been considered "undercrafted" in comparison with Claire Zeisler's elegant crochet in a series of twelve small panels of wool, thread, and leather (1976). Each slightly different from the next like tones in a chant, *Twelve Portraits* were as abstract and intimately personal as Baron's pieces, but affirmed Zeisler's reputation as a prime mover in the Fiber Movement within the craft field.

In Nancy Grossman's *Vom Ertrunkenen Madchen (concerning a Drowned Girl)* from 1974, scraps of deconstructed clothing tossed together in a flailing rhythm are the sort of unconventional materials used by the early Feminist artists with whom Grossman is identified. (Grossman is best known for later works of black leather—head and



body coverings zipped forbiddingly shut.)

Some artists are represented by early pieces of the sort that launched their careers. Lenore Tawney's signature piece of woven linen strips tapers outward from top and bottom toward an open center. Revealing two distinct phases of Magdalena Abakanovicz's *oeuvre* are a heavily textured abstract weaving (1971) and one of her hollow figures in burlap. Faith Ringgold's *Weeping Woman #4* (1973-89) of fabric embellished with beads and objects reminiscent of tribal artifacts, reflects the artist's African American aesthetic but predates her eloquent quilts that speak of present day African American experience. (1973-89).

Lesley Dill and Mimi Smith are among the artists from a younger generation whose works are distinguished by pliable materials but have neither self-identified as "fiber artists" nor been labeled as such. Dill's feathery *This Is a blossom of my mind* exemplifies her ongoing multi-media search for visual correlatives of the poetry of Emily Dickinson. Smith's *Table and Chair*, rendered diagrammatically with tape measures tacked to the wall in vanishing point perspective, appears deceptively simple in appearance but, the real dimensions in illusory space tease the mind. The most recent piece in the show is Annette Messenger's *Two Replicants*, a tall stuffed fabric construction floppily suggestive of a discarded toy (2006).

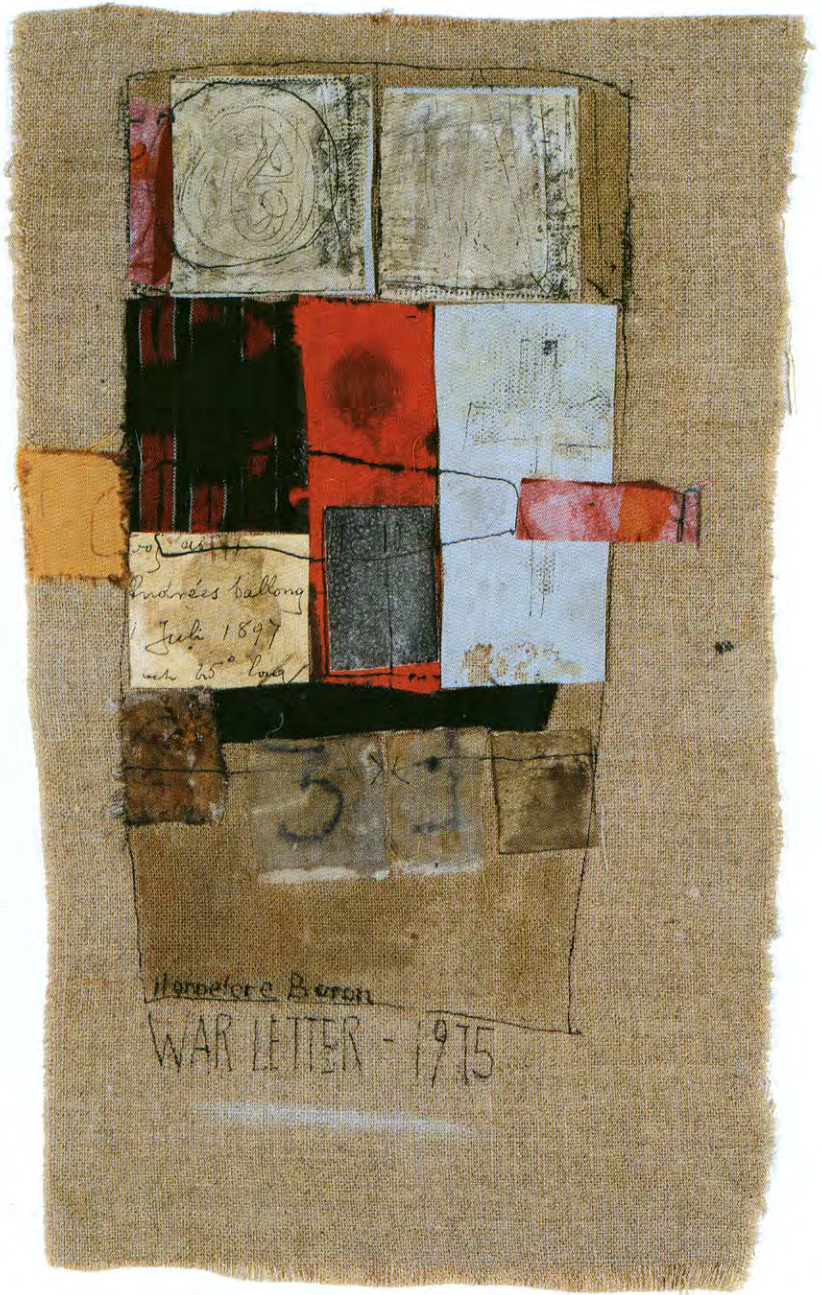




ABOVE: **BETTY SAAR** (b. 1926) *Blend* Mixed media collage on handmade paper, 55.5" x 25.75" x .75", signed, 2002.

LEFT: **MAGDALENA ABAKANOWICZ** (b. 1930) *Cercle Clair* Woven jute, 59" x 59" x 8.5", signed, 1971.

RIGHT: **HANNALORE BARON** (b. 1926–1987) *War Letter* Mixed media collage using fabric and thread, 11" x 7", signed, 1975.  
Photos: Courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, LLC, New York City.



Groundbreaking in the '60s, sculptures of fiber and metal by Barbara Chase-Riboud and Lee Bontecou, rarely seen now, were strong presences. Chase-Riboud was first recognized for unorthodox forms that set polished metal—in this case, bronze—against skeins of silk. Now she is famous as the novelist whose book *Sally Hemings* initiated questions about Thomas Jefferson's biography.

Bontecou is still producing sculpture but seldom exhibits. Typical of her meticulously built

forms with connotations of military equipment—art critic Arthur Danto described them as “fierce”—Bontecou’s untitled wall relief here incorporates a skin of recycled jeans into a skeletal frame of welded metal and wire.

While art history may fix these artists in place, this show declassified history, establishing an uncommon dialogue in the common language of thread. Only in Anne Ryan’s paper collages was “thread” a metaphor rather than actual stuff.